

LETTER TO THE EDITOR



The problematic case of gender-neutral pronouns: A transgender writer's response to "A modest proposal"

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I have been invited to respond to the "modest proposal" submitted in a letter to IJT's editor from Moser and Devereux (2016). I have also had the pleasure of reading responses to the same letter from Barrett (2016), and from Jones and Mullany (2016). Gender-neutral pronouns (GNPs) are the stuff of dreams for some, and for others they are the annoyance of the century. One can try diligently and fail miserably to deliver respectful language to every soul. It is important to try, however, especially when asked to do so; the personal effort, though initially awkward, can be especially meaningful for all parties involved.

Perhaps it's just my propensity to resist authority, but from my perspective as a professional writer, my first reaction is to assert my autonomy: I do not want to be told that I may only use specific gender-neutral pronouns in any context. As a trans person, though, I welcome an editorial policy that conveys to me the value of honoring the pronouns requested by each subject. The policies appearing in the Editorial "Language and trans health" (Bouman et al., 2017) describe the spirit with which a conscientious writer should approach trans people as subjects. Refinements may still be needed, but progress is apparent. Historically speaking, most linguistic changes that are destined to last for a generation or more are those changes that develop strong roots in the collective unconsciousness before they spring forth in full flower. As Jones and Mullany (2016) explain, the use of the singular "they" has been making its way into the common vernacular since before the eighteenth century, and one can still sense and observe resistance to it in the twenty-first century.

Modeling new or alternative ways of using language is effective, as Moser and Devereux (2016) aptly demonstrate, urging IJT to take a firm position and offer a model GNP scheme. The proposal from Moser and Devereux is both reasonable and honorable, yet I agree with both the other responses that the sample GNP scheme offered—indeed, I believe, any sample scheme—is (or will be) fraught with obvious difficulties and obscure complications. Language is too organic to impose rules upon it. Yes, there are rules in English grammar, but those are simply patterns logical thinkers recognized after the language had proven itself effective, i.e., a useful tool for clear communication. I think the proper policy for IJT to adopt is one that encourages researchers, writers, and readers to respect every subject's preferred pronouns, whether those are gender-neutral or traditional, and that when personal pronouns are unknown or are used collectively (e.g., where a traditionalist would use the generic he), the singular they is most appropriate.

Anyone can coin a new term, but no one can predict whether it will catch on for a time, or whether it will endure. The term transgender was rejected by many trans people when it came to public attention in the early 1990s. So was cisgender just a decade ago. Alternative pronoun schemes have come and gone. There's no way to predict what new term or usage will burst onto the scene, displacing something else. So long as the words work to convey meaningful concepts, facts, theories, etc.—in the case of pronouns, to function as clarifiers and referents—and so long

as people use them of their own free will, the power of the words will grow.

References

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